



**Your seat belt
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Surviving a Car Crash

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One person in 60 in America dies in a motor-vehicle accident, and five people in 60 are permanently disabled. I'm now one of the five in 60. I was a seat belt away from being a fatality.

My story started during the early morning darkness of June 28, as my wife, Nona, and I were northbound on Texas Loop 1604. We were going about 50 mph when a 24-year-old man ran a stop sign at the intersection of Stuart Road and hit us just ahead of where I was sitting in the driver's seat.

I didn't see him coming until he entered the intersection because he hadn't bothered to turn on his lights, which also probably explains why he ran the stop sign—he couldn't see it. Anyone who ever has had a driver's license usually does things like turning on headlights and stopping at stop

signs, but this man never had bothered to get a license. So, naturally, he also had no insurance. If this incident had happened in my home state of Michigan, he now would be in jail. Because it happened in Texas, though, he simply paid a fine, which explains why our insurance is so high in the state.

At this point, let me review the three principles of crash survival. First, you must have a survivable compartment. One that loses integrity and impinges on your vital organs will kill you—so will a compartment that catches fire or fills with smoke.

In our case, Nona's side of the car was OK. I barely got out with my life because the roof collapsed on me, removing my scalp, and the steering column broke, causing the wheel to hit me in the chest. On the bright side, the 4-gauge steel in the front-door pillar and firewall of my 1974 Dodge Dart absorbed much of the energy upon impact. The transfer case of the transmission also worked like it was supposed to; it broke, and the engine submarined downward, avoiding the crew compartment—my survivable space.

While on the subject of crew compartments, let me ask, "What kind of shoes do you wear in a car?" On the day of my wreck, I was wearing my Belleville flight boots, which have a thick, tough, rubber sole. After the crash, shorted electrical wiring caused flames to erupt under the hood. The fuel-supply system luckily wasn't breached, or I would have had an inferno on my hands. I couldn't move my left foot because the thick metal of the firewall had deformed around my boot. Without it, my foot would have been crushed. As it was, I simply unlaced my boot, pulled out my foot, and got out of the car. I urge you to think twice about wearing sandals or other dangerous footwear.


The second principle of crash survival is gradual deceleration. Once I saw the man's Blazer in the intersection, I had time to turn away slightly, which lessened the lateral G forces. Despite this maneuver, though, I suf-

fered fractures of the left scapula and first left rib. The scapula is a tough bone, and breaking it usually involves accelerations in the 25-G range—the force range required to separate the root of the aorta from the heart—so, I was lucky.

The third principle of crash survival is passenger restraint. Nona and I were fastened tightly in our seat belts, and, as anyone who has ridden in the Dart with me can attest, the inertial reels are more likely to lock than not. An unrestrained passenger strikes objects in a car at whatever velocity the car is traveling when an accident occurs. Needless to say, if we had hit the dash at 50 mph, I would not be writing this story.

Your seat belt is the best lifesaving device in your car. In the case of a side impact, like Nona and I experienced, it's the only lifesaving device you have; an air bag won't deploy. Simply put, don't move your vehicle without fastening your seat belt.

I'm still not driving, so I've had to rely on other people for transportation. A few weeks after my accident, a friend picked up my son to go to Cub Scouts. She wasn't wearing her seat belt, and neither were her three children. I asked her to stop, then chewed her out for endangerment. She agreed it was a good idea for everyone to buckle up and thanked me. Two days later, another driver hit her from behind at a stoplight. She had some sore neck muscles from whiplash, but both her and the kids are going to be fine. If they hadn't been buckled up, there would have been some major injuries.

I'm back to working half days, and I'm busy with physical therapy as my wounds heal. I'll be disabled permanently from this mishap, but I'll probably fly again in a few months. Seat belts saved Nona and I, so do me a favor: If you're lax about using these devices, or if you don't dress like you're going to have an accident every time you get in a car, now is a great time to change your habits. 

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